**MEMORANDUM**

**IASC REFERENCE GROUP FOR MEETING HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES IN URBAN AREAS**

19 FEBRUARY 2014 – MEETING MINUTES

**PARTICIPATING AGENCIES:**

UNDP/BCPR-Early Recovery Cluster

UN-Habitat Geneva   
UNHCR   
IFRC/Global Shelter Cluster

UNEP-OCHA Joint Environmental Unit  
IFRC/Global Food Security Cluster

IOM

IASC SECRETARIAT

**MEETING MINUTES:**

I. Syria Regional Update  -- Ewen Macleod, UNHCR, Chief of Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES)

**Discussion Summary:**  UNHCR’s Ewen Macleod provided an overview of some of the principal challenges and interventions to the on-going emergency in the Syrian region.  His presentation on Syria’s neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt and the response for over 2.4million refugees. As of today, there are just under a million Syrian refugees are in Lebanon, 612,000 in Turkey, 570,00 in Jordan, 222,000 in Iraq, and 134,000 in Egypt. The number of Syrian refugees continues to grow even if the pace is not as fast as in the intial 3 years of the crisis.  Just since the beginning of this year, 100,000 people fled Syria, 20,000 of them were from Aleppo alone. UNHCR estimates that 70-80% of the refugees are in non-camp, principally urban settings.  Key findings and challenges to date include:

1.  All the countries, except Egypt, to which refugees are moving are middle income which makes their subsistence costs for food, shelter/rents, healthcare and education relatively expensive.  This also makes relief operations from the international community more expensive than in other contexts.  World Bank recently undertook an economic and social impact analysis for Lebanon which assesses refugee vulnerabilities.

2.  Because these countries are middle-income, they are a lower priority for development assistance or not benefitting from development aid at all.  Relief and development needs are falling to the humanitarian assistance to be covered..  Although relatively generous, it’s not clear how long donor humanitarian assistance can be sustained at levels of $4-5 billion or 25% of all worldwide humanitarian assistance.  The development needs far exceed the resources in hand with estimated $7 billion in lost economic activity.  Although there is an emerging partnership with the World Bank to address some of the transitional and development needs, it’s not clear how much benefitting countries will be able to borrow under IBRD given the already high indebtedness levels of Jordan and Lebanon especially.

3.  A key challenge in this emergency is the mixed government roles and responsibilities which make stakeholder engagement and partnerships more complicated.  In most of the affected countires, the central government funds and administers services that have impacts at the local level including health and education.  Local governments administer solid waste and other environmental interventions but are still highly dependent on central government budgets.

4.  Shelter/housing is a critical challenge since an estimated 70% of refugees are renting in local housing markets.  Affordability is a critical concern since much of the housing available for renting is middle income and not accessible to all refugees and overall inflation levels are climbing as the supply of housing units diminishes.  Sharing housing with host families and communities is reaching saturation levels.  In order to cope with affordable housing shortages and rising costs, the quality of housing/shelter solutions is declining as refugees exploit unconventional options such as living in garages, public facilities and shops.  A recent study by Oxfam demonstrated that the gap between income and expenditures is growing for refugee families and more of them are getting more indebted with coping mechanisms being stressed or depleted. Access to food, health and education are also key challenges. Currently, the local schools are not able accommodate all of the refugee children. It is noteworthy that 78% of the refugees are women and children.

5.  A key factor in this crisis is how long it will last?  The consensus of most agencies is that this is not a short-term crisis and will be with us for the long-term crisis for anywhere from 10-30 years.  An important consideration is how humanitarian assistance will be sustained for the required period given that assistance levels will probably decline over time?

6. The duration of the Syria Crisis impacts all of the critical vulnerabilities of social cohesion, family debt management, an inflated relief economy, livelihoods, poverty levels, youth and children out of school, and internal migration as well as secondary movements beyond the region.

6.  To respond to these circumstances and needs of refugees, UNHCR, WFP and other agencies are pursuing:

        -Improved targeting through monitoring and surveys household-based assessment of needs in order to identify those currently in need and to keep track of refugees and host community members for the longer term by host governments for potential government-led assistance;

        -Cash-based assistance, including e-vouchers:  This is highly empowering and gets cash in the pockets of refugees however it does not solve issues of access to healthcare and education which are still government-funded and managed services.  Access to education for children is especially strained and already there is insufficient classroom space to accommodate the needs in Lebanon and Jordan.

        -Shift to local neighbourhood-based solutions to target assistance to those most in need and to address potential disparities between host communities and refugees living in them.  Governments want to avoid creating additional social tensions by exacerbating disparities. World Bank and UNHCR are jointly undertaking an assessment of poverty disparities in these contexts.

        -Relax work restrictions for refugees.  Some of UNHCR’s research indicates that where refugees are permitted to work and to engage in economic activities, the economies benefit and actually grow faster.  The case of northern Jordan and Dabab in Kenya were highlighted.

Please Note: This was to be a joint presentation with UN-Habitat’s Szilard Fricska from Amman but due to technical difficulties he was not able to connect. His presentation on UN-Habitat’s urban interventions will be rescheduled for the April meeting of the RG MHCUA. Please find attached UN-Habitat’s proposed program description for the Syrian Regional Response.

II. REDLAC: Strengthening the Regional Shelter Working Group through IFRC-UN-Habitat Collaboration (Ana Pont, IFRC/Global Shelter Cluster)

**Discussion Summary**: Ms. Ana Pont described a new activity to strengthen the effectiveness and coordination of the shelter working group within REDLAC to provide shelter/housing support to LAC countries during emergencies. This initiatives is being supported by ECHO and Norcap with IFRC and UN-Habitat Geneva Office as implementing partners. A one-year work plan has been developed with the following elements:

1. Strengthen coordination among shelter actors by undertaking a mapping of shelter actors in the region, identify their strengths in terms of areas of expertise, experience and prior projects undertaken and clarify roles and responsibilities;

2. Review opportunities for broader coordination within REDLAC with Wash, health, education and other sectors for more effective shelter responses with assistance from OCHA;

3. Undertake an assessment of worldwide tools and how they might strengthen performance of shelter actors in the LAC region;

4. Strengthen LAC shelter actors’ capacities by facilitating their access to worldwide training opportunities;

5. Develop criteria to assess the contingency and preparedness planning of LAC countries and cities;

6. Select 3-4 focus LAC countries, based on the criteria, as pilots for the REDLAC/Shelter Working Group assistance;

7. Promote country-to-country, city-to-city exchanges of lessons learned and good practices within the LAC region;

8. Develop/revise guidelines for the Shelter Working Group on how to more effectively work with governments and civil society for more effective shelter responses; and,

9. Undertake two regional seminars in cooperation with the Global Shelter Cluster/Geneva to highlight good practices and lessons learned from Haiti and the region.

**Action Point:** RG MHCUA members are invited to share any experiences and resources that support this work plan implementation. The 2010 IASC Assessment of Tools for MHCUA will be shared.

III. Environmental Emergencies and Urbanization (Emilia Wahlstrom, Joint UNEP-OCHA Environmental Unit)

**Discussion Summary:** Ms. Wahlstrom briefed the RG MHCUA on overall operations of the JEU as well as urbanization and environmental emergency linkages. Main topics covered were urbanization as a megatrend and global assessment of environmental emergency risk. The JEU’s chief priorities are response to environmental crises, environmental emergency preparedness and the integration of environment into humanitarian programmes. Examples of JEU environmental emergency responses in urban context include the Nairobi Fuel Oil Spill of 2010 and the Brazzaville Ammunitions Depot Explosion of 2012.

With respect to urbanization as a megatrend, the JEU has undertaken a study on the impacts of climate change and urbanization on environmental emergencies. The study "Keeping Up With Megatrends" (https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/unep\_ocha-keeping-up-with-megatrends\_0.pdf) looked at the linkages between urban growth, industrialization and natural resource use in combination with poor land use planning and building standards. Some concerns highlighted in these areas include: how to access slums during environmental emergencies; evacuation of the affected population; and the lack of contingency planning for industrial and environmentally-based emergencies.

A number of tools developed by the JEU were shared with the RG MHUCUA members including: (1) Environmental Emergencies Centre website ([www.eecentre.org](http://www.eecentre.org)); (2) APELL-Awareness and preparedness to Emergencies at Local Level; (3) FEAT-Flash Environmental Assessment Tool which is used by UNDAC to assess industrial facility hazards; (4) the Environmental Emergency Risk Index.

There was a fair amount of discussion about how to assess urbanization factors and environmental risk to strengthen JEU’s tools and indices including: taking a neighbourhood-based approach to address the diversity within large cities; distinguishing informal settlements and formal settlements in terms of vulnerability; urban sprawl and density. There was discussion about how to better integrate environmental vulnerabilities and risks into humanitarian program design and needs assessments including UNDAC, MIRA and Humanitarian Program Cycle. There was also recognition that the methodological, analytical approach of the JEU has useful elements for the work of the IFRC and UN-Habitat to strengthen the Shelter Working Group of REDLAC.

**Action Point**: RG MHCUA members suggested a number of resources that could help the JEU address some of the above concerns including: (1) JEU makes use of UN-Habitat’s Global Urban Observatory information base regarding characteristics of worldwide urban centers; (2) JEU actively engage the IASC Task Team on Resilience and Preparedness on environmental vulnerabilities; and (3) JEU to share finalized Environmental Emergency Risk Index study with RG MHCUA members.

IV. AOB

1. RG MHCUA Chair, George Deikun, updated members on a key networking event at the upcoming Seventh World Urban Forum, 5-10 April 2014 in Medellin, Colombia that will seek to link the World Humanitarian Summit and Habitat III, both in 2016, so that urban humanitarian issues are incorporated into both for a. UN-Habitat plans to sponsor a networking event at WUF7 on this topic to include WHS Secretariat/OCHA, IFRC, DFID, UNDP and member states. The event description is attached for RG MHCUA members review and comment. You can register for WUF7 at: <https://www.unhadb.org/unhadb/login.php>

2. The World Humanitarian Summit new site is now active at: [www.worldhumanitariansummit.org](http://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org)

3. RG MHCUA Chair, George Deikun, announced that funding has been secured from the UNGA and ECOSOC to stand-up the Habitat III Secretariat. The UN Inter-Agency Consultative Group for Habitat III, organized during the ECOSOC 2013 in Geneva, which groups nearly 40 agencies will be a vehicle for the UN system’s input to the Habitat III agenda. Additional info on Habitat III is located at: http://www.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=831

4. UNHCR called for technical resources to populate their newly-created Urban Good Practices site. RG MHCUA members are encouraged to share potential resource materials with Ms. MaryBeth Morand of UNHCR at: [morand@unhcr.org](mailto:morand@unhcr.org).

Below is more detail on the UNHCR site.

The Good Practices for Urban Refugees website is a collaborative site soliciting positive examples of programs from institutions working with urban refugees. NGOs, CBOs, UN agencies and universities are invited to post descriptions of effective programs serving urban refugees and their host communities. The site will categorize these examples by sector, geographic location and organization. Multi-media, program tools, evaluations and research are also welcomed contributions. UNHCR’s Urban Refugee Steering Group and a collective of University of Michigan Law School students are developing and moderating the website. The site was launched in April, 2013. Submissions, questions and more information can be made available through email contact with: [morand@unhcr.org](mailto:morand@unhcr.org). More info on urbangoodpractices.org.pdf is attached.